Views from the margins: Teacher perspectives on alternative education provision in Ireland

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Views from the margins: Teacher perspectives on alternative education provision in Ireland

Alternative education provision in Ireland is under-researched. This paper is a qualitative investigation of the perspectives of a purposive sample of ten teachers on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in their respective alternative settings of a voluntary education centre, a Youthreach centre and a post-primary special school. 'Funds of knowledge' ideas contribute to the theoretical framework of the study (Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez, 1992). The findings in this paper focus on: (1) how curriculum is enacted and mediated in alternative education settings; (2) the pedagogical decisions of teachers as they strive to connect their students to learning; (3) the tensions in assessment practices as teachers and alternative settings attempt to provide authentic and yet certified evidence of learning through the formal state assessment processes. This article is timely as it offers a view of the under-researched area of alternative settings in Ireland.

Keywords**:** Alternative education, inclusive education, disadvantaged youth, teacher perspectives, Youthreach, special schools, voluntary education setting

Introduction

This research investigates the approaches to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment evident in three alternative education settings in the Republic of Ireland through the perspectives of teachers. Alternative education settings provide extremely important services to some of the most marginalised young people in our communities across the world. In Ireland, the literature and research around alternative settings is far less-developed than might be expected. Therefore, this article focuses on developing a snapshot of alternative provision through reporting on our research in three alternative education settings in Ireland and, in doing so, providing a glimpse into a largely hidden sector of the Irish post-primary provision jigsaw. The lenses of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment have been chosen in order to facilitate exposures and discussion relevant to how learning happens in alternative settings in Ireland.

In recent times, school completion rates have reached the exceptionally high level of over ninety per cent of students completing the Leaving Certificate, Ireland's terminal state examination taken at the end of second-level education (DES 2016). However, as is the case in many countries, this school completion figure is significantly weighted in favour of middle class populations. A disproportionate number of young people who have experienced poverty leave school early (Byrne and Smyth 2010). For example, a recent evaluation of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)[i] programme revealed that 92.5 per cent of students from non-DEIS schools completed the senior cycle whilst only 82 per cent of those in DEIS schools achieved senior cycle completion (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston 2015). Some young people are also far more likely to have left school early or found themselves

referred to an alternative education setting like those that feature as the subject of discussion with teachers in this article.

As part of a wider study of curriculum design and student agency, the Adolescent Literacy, Identity And School (ALIAS) study focused upon experiences of curriculum, learning, assessment and identity in alternative education settings in Ireland. This paper reports on key findings on teacher perspectives from these alternative settings which included a Youthreach centre, a voluntary education setting and a special school. These settings, their students and their teachers exist on the margins of the formal education system and therefore this paper turns a timely gaze in their direction. Students who find themselves in alternative settings such as Youthreach centres (training centres for 15-20 year-olds, mainly early school leavers, catering for 6,000 students in Ireland), special schools (over 100 schools catering for students with diagnosed special educational needs) and voluntary education settings (voluntary providers existing without formal state funding, recognition or support) have often, at one time or another, attended a mainstream setting and were removed or voluntarily (through their parents/ guardians) transferred to an alternative setting. The focus of our findings here is on the perspectives of the educators in alternative and flexible settings for young people. Our findings will discuss areas such as: curriculum mediation, pedagogical approaches and assessment. Some typologies of alternative education may not include special schools. The special school is included here because it provides an alternative to mainstream post-primary provision where students are provided with targeted intervention and support due to particular diagnosed and qualifying criteria (in this instance Mild General Learning Disability). Youdell (2010) refers to ‘end of line’ special schools which emphasise the intrinsic othering of parallel systems of provision in post-primary education, where placement options are limited due to previous mainstream experience or due to recommendations from external professional agencies. Indeed, significant research and commentary has pointed out

how neoliberal education policy has pushed more students to the margins of regular schooling and into the liminal zones of alternative settings (McGregor, Mills, te Riele and Hayes 2015). The genesis of this paper lies in the necessity for examining alternative education provision in Ireland from an inclusive education perspective, most particularly in the sense that curriculum, pedagogy and assessment can act as devices for inclusion and exclusion (Florian, Rouse and Black-Hawkins, 2017). Therefore, this paper will use these lenses to examine how teachers in these alternative education sites act to include their students in education as a valued human activity. The paper will also contribute to the limited available research in this field in the Irish context whilst also extending knowledge in the international context.

Defining alternative education

This section will provide some descriptions of alternative education settings and some knowledge relating to approaches to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in these settings. Alternative education is a branch of education often defined in terms of provision for students who have (or are about to), for different reasons, removed themselves or have been removed from mainstream education. Oftentimes, alternative education settings exist in the margins of mainstream school systems where they become settings of last resort for students. In Ireland, this often happens at post-primary level, however there are students who also attend special schools for their primary and post-primary education. At post-primary level, movement between alternative education and mainstream schools is one-way traffic in the sense that once students cross over the boundary into alternative education, they are highly unlikely to return to mainstream at second level. Alternative education is not widely defined in the Irish

context and therefore we will begin by drawing upon some international definitions in order to contextualise the field.

Research in the area of alternative and flexible education settings is far more widely developed in international contexts (Mills, te Riele, McGregor and Baroutsis 2017). Indeed Mills et al. point to the contribution of Thomson and Pennachia's (2014) work in the UK and Aron's (2006) contributions in the USA, both of which inform this paper also. Thomson and Pennachia (2014, 12) draw upon the official UK definition of alternative education as provision for:

> *pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; education arranged by schools for pupils on a fixed period exclusion; and pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour* (Department for Education 2013).

Aron (2006, 6) defines alternative education provision in the United States of America as:

> *schools or programmes that are set up by states, school districts or other entities to serve people who are not succeeding in traditional public environments. Alternative education programs offer students who are failing academically or may have learning disabilities, behavioural problems, or poor attendance an opportunity to achieve in a different setting and use different and innovative learning models. While there are many different kinds of alternative schools and programmes, they are often characterised by their flexible schedules, smaller teacher-students ratios, and modified curricula.*

This definition is broad and draws together similar models of alternative education as those recognised, for the purposes of this paper, in Ireland. Issues such as attendance, diagnosed special educational needs, academic, behavioural and social issues are foregrounded. Mary Anne Raywid's (1994) typology of alternative education provision has been among the most enduring contributions to defining the field of alternative education. Raywid's typology categorised three distinct types of alternative education provision: Popular Innovations (schools of choice with particular specialisations/ interests); Last Chance Programs (sometimes in-school and offering mainstream curriculum, pedagogy and assessment

opportunities); programmes with a Remedial Focus. In Ireland, the vast majority of alternative and flexible education settings for early school leavers are referred to as 'second chance' programmes. Special schools would be different in terms of having a specific focus on a particular need (such as literacy, behaviour, diagnosed learning difficulties, etc).

In the UK, a broader range of alternative settings exist. Kraftl (2014; 2016) has provided a geographical perspective on alternative settings focusing on spaces such as forest schools, care farms and homeschool alternatives where the physical space, funding, approaches to pedagogy and social goals are significantly different from mainstream. Kraftl's research asks us to question our normative assumptions about the intersecting spaces between education and childhood in a fundamental way and one which offers a more inclusive perspective on what school means.

Bascia and Maton (2016) emphasised the innovative pedagogical work evident in alternative settings through thematic teaching practices and student-led democratic approaches to education. They also emphasise the different teacher identities evident in these settings as teachers draw far more on their own biographies, interests and diverse experiences to drive curriculum and school innovation. Indeed, despite being last chance settings for many students, alternative settings have been shown to be sites of significant educational engagement where opportunities for learning and development appear more attractive and learner-centred than those available in regular schools (Hadar, Hotam and Kizel 2018). Indeed, as McGregor and Mills (2012) found, alternative settings exhibit many important lessons for schools that struggle to engage and retain marginalised youth in school. They emphasised flexibility in structures and curriculum, positive teacher-student relationships and pedagogical engagement as key points of interest to educating youth experiencing or at risk of marginalisation. Other recent research has also emphasised the possibilities and hope

offered by learning from alternative school cultures where genuine student engagement, creativity and a collective view of 'school' as community serve to resist the dominant neoliberal paradigm of performativity and competitive individualism that has come to dominate mainstream school settings (Riddle and Cleaver 2017). Similarly, Schoone (2017) focused on tutor pedagogy as significant and transformative in alternative education settings. Kitty te Riele (2017) focused on the centrality of the affective work between teachers and students in alternative settings where relationships, care and respect were central to the experience. Evidence regarding assessment practices in alternative settings is less-developed than that available on curriculum and pedagogy. It is often the case that the same assessment system that is used as systematic sorting and ranking is prioritised and prized in alternative settings also (Francis and Mills 2012). There is also the view that alternative settings can also contribute to deficit-oriented approaches in terms of social and curricular intervention (Henrich, 2005). McCluskey, Riddell and Weedon (2015) also point to inadequacies in alternative provision in areas such as inadequate curriculum provision, some deficiencies in some settings in terms of pastoral support, and, most worryingly, issues around safety and care in some alternative provision sites. Thomson and Pennachia's (2014) have also raised issues around the lack of communication between mainstream schools; opportunities for student reintegration into mainstream; and policies for monitoring and evaluating alternative provision in terms of quality and outcomes for students.

Therefore, there is some presence in the international literature framing the alternative setting experience, most particularly in areas such as learner identity, the space of the alternative setting, curriculum and pedagogical interventions. This paper will develop research on alternative settings in the context of Ireland.

Alternative education in Ireland

Alternative and flexible education settings are very much a feature of the educational landscape in Ireland, however research on the area is far less visible. This paper may provoke some debate around how we define, include and exclude various models of provision within the field of alternative education in Ireland. The schools included in this study, as will be described in more depth later, represent three distinct settings: a Youthreach service; a voluntary education setting; and a designated special school. The first two may be considered uncontroversial in their inclusion here. The decision to include the special school as an alternative setting was to show how these schools, particularly post-primary special schools exist alongside mainstream education in terms of context, governance (post-primary special schools are recognised as primary schools) and practice. For instance, O'Gorman, Salmon and Murphy's (2016, 537) recent literature review of alternative education would omit the special school sector, given its focus on a particular characteristic rather than the provision of education through "offering alternative methods". A significant piece of research into Youthreach has been undertaken by Kathriona McHugh which highlights the importance of alternative settings prioritising care, respect, learning as well as foregrounding the need for further attention to be paid to alternative education in Ireland (McHugh, 2014). Other studies have looked at the profile of Youthreach attendees (NEPS 2017; Gordon 2013); special education provision through special school and special classes in Ireland (Ware et al. 2009); ethnographic accounts of some alternative education settings (O'Brien 2015) and perspectives on special school settings in Ireland and England (Day, Prunty and Dupont 2012). Allied with previous research, this paper positions itself in the space of investigating teacher perspectives on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in alternative settings as a broad term for schools functioning outside mainstream provision.

Theoretical Framing

The ALIAS research is scaffolded by broad sociocultural positions within which the intersections between school and identity are investigated. Most particularly, we drew upon Funds of Knowledge (FoK) (Moll et al. 1992); and Funds of Pedagogy (FoP) (Rodriguez 2013; Zipin 2009) to frame our thinking about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in alternative settings. This 'funds' orientation scaffolded how we viewed the emergent findings from the data. The FoK approach to teaching and learning emphasises the use of knowledge and skills inherent in households, communities, cultures and backgrounds, gathered through ethnographic methods where developmental and process-based approaches to school are emphasised (Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti 2006). We cannot claim to be engaged in this way as our research was conducted far more from the outside than from within these education settings. However, as Hogg (2011) has found, there are multiple variations on how FoK has been taken up in the research literature and this study offers similar variety in that it is more interested in recognising alignments with FoK theory rather than enacting FoK practice in these settings. We were attracted by 'funds' approaches because they offered an opportunity to disrupt cultural deficit discourses around marginalised students. We also wanted to evidence "the presence of knowledge, skills, and strategies among students" who were experiencing marginalisation from mainstream education rather than harping on the absences that were contributing to disengagement from school (Rodriguez, 2013, 90). Therefore, we draw upon the importance laid upon the knowledge, experience, background and interests of learners' lives central to the FoK approach to education. We take a broader view of FoK, like Moje et al. (2004), where the FoK perspective is aligned with the broad out-of-school knowledges and experiences a person brings to their learning environment. Gonzalez (2013) explores the pedagogical implications of the FoK theoretical approach to unpack why teachers make pedagogical choices based on the contextual experiences of their students in order to create transformative and democratic pedagogical interactions. Similarly, we use

Zipin's (2009) framing of the 'funds' tradition through FoP, where the understanding is that the lifeworlds of students are full of pedagogical engagements that lead to learning. Zipin (2009, 318) extends the FoK idea to investigate "ways of knowing and transacting knowledge" by recognising authentic pedagogical engagement. With regard to assessment, the FoK tradition has also proved influential. For example, Klenowski (2009) raises important questions about equity and fairness in relation to assessment for indigenous populations in Australia. Klenowski's work principally looks towards assessment as more flexible, culturally fair and relevant to learner contexts and experiences.

Methodology

This paper draws on 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews with staff drawn from three alternative education settings. It was a purposive sample as the settings had been chosen in order to represent the diversity of alternative settings available in Ireland and the cohort of teachers employed therein. The research team approached a Youthreach centre, a special school and a voluntary education setting as each of these settings provided a nuanced version of alternative education provision in Ireland. The following table presents the characteristics of the participating teachers.

[Table 1 near here]

Members of the research team visited each of the settings and a semi-structured interview protocol was enacted in the individual interviews with the 10 participant teachers. The interview protocol addressed key areas of interest to the research team: learning and identity; teaching and learning in context; literacy and learning; digital literacy and learning;

assessment and doing things differently in alternative settings. Each interview was then transcribed and analysed through a process of thematic analysis where each transcript was read and cross-coded by two members of the research team. Braun and Clarke's (2006) broad perspective on thematic analysis was taken here where themes emerged through the coding process and significance was determined by the research team. Thirty one specific codes were identified in the interviews. These codes led to the formation of six significant thematic areas including curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Other themes that emerged strongly from the data but are not addressed in this paper include identity and alternative education settings; SEN and alternative education settings; social and emotional wellbeing in alternative settings.

Ethical clearance was received for the ALIAS project through our home university's Ethics Committee and full consent was sought from participants prior to visiting their sites. A comprehensive description of the research and the semi-structured interview protocol was shared with each participant two weeks in advance of the visit and many participants had the opportunity to reflect on the content. Several participants brought written notes to the interview in order to prompt their responses based on their thinking and reflection. This article focuses most specifically on data referring to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

The alternative settings

Greenfields Special School addresses the educational requirements of students who are of post-primary age and who have been diagnosed with a mild general learning disability. The school has an enrolment of 150 students. Somewhere along the journey of schooling, these students have been removed from the mainstream setting and placed within the special school context.

Bloomsbury Youthreach Centre is an urban alternative education setting catering for 80 students. The vast majority of students have been asked to leave, or elected to leave,

traditional mainstream post-primary settings. Many have diagnostic labels aligning with Emotional Behavioural Disorders (EBD) as well as coming from families who are marginalised in terms of socio-economic status. There is also a significant cohort of migrant students attending this school. Interestingly, of the three teachers interviewed, two of them are not teaching subjects for which they are deemed qualified by the Teaching Council.

The Highgrove Learning Centre is a voluntary education setting which, unlike the other two settings, exists outside of the official state system of provision. It is not recognised by the Department of Education and Skills and therefore operates almost entirely upon volunteer work and voluntary charitable contributions from the public. In this sense, it is also outside traditional systems of governance and the volunteer teachers do not necessarily have qualified teacher status. This is exemplified by the sample of three teachers interviewed here, two of whom do not have an initial teacher education qualification, nor are they teaching subjects in which they hold a recognised degree.

Findings

The data revealed several significant strands of interest focusing on issues of curriculum, pedagogy and tensions in assessment practices. This section of the paper offers evidence drawn for the coded interview data under the thematic areas of: curriculum innovation in alternative settings; learner-centred pedagogies; and tensions in assessment in alternative settings.

Curriculum innovation in alternative settings

A prominent feature of provision in these alternative settings was the approach to curriculum adopted in each setting. The style of curriculum development evidenced in each setting shows many alignments with the FoK approach where settings begin from student interests and

student needs as opposed to being driven by external curricular forces. This dynamic student-focused model does feature strongly throughout the dataset. However, the spectre of summative external state assessment also looms large as a constant backdrop that increases in importance as students in these settings approach leaving age.

Curriculum has developed as a malleable and dynamic element of provision for students. For example, James, a volunteer teacher in Highgrove Learning Centre, described how his setting, a voluntary school setting, places the student at the centre of provision. They will provide what the student wants to do. In this case, Japanese (a non-traditional subject in Ireland) is provided for the student in order to motivate engagement:

> *It's inclusive, we will cater to any student here. We will cater to what they need, we will get them to where they need to be. If they want to learn a subject that we don't have, we will try and get it to them that's why we... Like we have met a few students over the last few years who wanted to learn Japanese so we have Japanese now. (James, volunteer teacher)*

This student-centredness is further emphasised by the principal of the voluntary setting:

> *I suppose we have to find within each young person what their passion is and then we have to drive that passion. We have to build their self-esteem and one of the ways that we...build relationships here.*

A teacher in Greenfields Special School described how they:

> *We'd have themes every month that we use so it's just a matter of picking up where they are and maybe doing work that's left or doing something that I'd have ideas on doing myself.*

This thematic approach to curriculum was seen as central as it provided greater flexibility in order to engage the student in learning:

> *Primarily I suppose what has happened is that we made the curriculum more entertaining, accessible, interesting and appropriate for them. So that means that the disengagement is less then.*

This curriculum flexibility was seen as working for the students because existing curriculum was perceived as "just probably a bit too rigid and a bit too goal or end oriented rather than student oriented" (Daniel, special school teacher). This shift in curriculum towards a student-

oriented model was a noticeable feature of each of these settings. In fact, this special school setting displayed a strong history of designing their own curricular interventions that they have found to be more motivating and engaging for their particular student population (students diagnosed with mild general learning disabilities).

Similarly, the Bloomsbury Youthreach described examples of curriculum innovation and design created to be student-centred and engaging for their particular cohort of students. The principal, Frank, described how the school had been engaged in various curricular innovations where staff had designed their own modules based on their work with students. The Principal showed an exemplar of the document that had been re-fashioned as an accredited module at level 2 on the National Qualifications Framework, and he commented that:

> *we find that excellent for fellas who come to us maybe straight out of primary school or who are 'new Irish', for want of a better word, and are struggling with English and maths. So you are doing things like functional maths. Like numbers, numeracy, reading, communication skills (Frank, Youthreach principal).*

Clearly, curriculum flexibility in this instance is to meet with the needs of students who are finding it difficult to engage with some of the foundational aspects of education including literacy and numeracy. The issue of learning English as an Additional language is also raised indirectly here. There is some evidence here that difference, whether it is in ability, ethnicity or background, can be constructed as a deficit or indeed a statement of possibility for some students. However, difference can also be framed in the positive in alternative education settings. For instance, in Bloomsbury Youthreach centre, Martina emphasised the flexibility of their setting, something she saw as distinctly different from what was being provided by mainstream schools:

> *But then we adapt the curriculum so like in a way we are not in a place where the curriculum is restricting us because I think, I would imagine you would be in mainstream. (Martina, Youthreach teacher)*

Throughout all of these interviews, curriculum was discussed in terms of innovation, adaptability and malleability. Curriculum was seen as something dynamic where teachers could exercise agency over content and this allowed for increased student engagement and motivation to learn. However, the externally assessed state examinations were also evidenced as a very strong guiding influence on both the pedagogical approaches of the teachers and their perceptions of student requirements, as will be discussed in a later section of this paper.

Learner-centred pedagogies

The participants reported some novel and innovative approaches to pedagogy where student motivation and accessibility were foregrounded over curricular coverage pressures aimed at terminal examination performance. Other research has shown this exam-led focus in post-primary mainstream settings in Ireland (Gleeson 2012; Smyth and Banks 2012). This perspective is not entirely absent in alternative settings either, however, there is also significant evidence here for diversifying pedagogy beyond didactic, teacher-centric approaches. These teacher-participants all offered accounts of how they drew readily upon the learning contexts of their students in their pedagogical design. This evidence aligns with the FoP approaches outlined earlier in the article. As evidenced here, these settings deployed access to online learning platforms, access to digital technologies, individualised differentiation for students, emphasising oral language development, using visual cues to aid learning, encouraging student creativity, project-based learning and experiential learning opportunities in order to engage their students.

The voluntary education setting developed access to online learning (ALISON) creating flexibility for students who could not meet the rigours and rigidity of the school day in mainstream settings. Through the ALISON website students could engage with a wide variety of modules (examples given here were Journalism and Graphic Design) using digital

pedagogies that seemed to appeal to them. Digital pedagogies appealed to students across all three settings in this study, however, teachers often reported that students limited themselves to social media and online gaming. Teachers commented that this was leading to some issues around critical literacy and developing the faculties to be discerning about online content. Tara from Bloomsbury commented that:

> *... Like they would come in and they'd say, 'Oh my God you hear Facebook? We are going to be bombed tomorrow' and you are thinking they don't differentiate or they don't discriminate that not everything on the internet is true.*

However, as Daniel in Greenfields Special School commented, "I would just think that digital is ubiquitous and that it's everywhere". He also suggested that the digital world needed to be respected and learned about as students could be at risk. Daniel stated that "there are a lot of, I suppose, strange and dangerous people out there that our students might be more vulnerable". Other teachers reported that digital technologies often provided some motivation for students. Frank, in Bloomsbury Youthreach centre stated that:

> *The amount of stuff that they are accessing on Google is actually phenomenal. You can resent that or you can work with it. I try to work with it sometimes. I would often ask a fella to pull out his mobile phone and look something up*

In sum, digital pedagogies displayed potential for teachers in alternative settings but they also urged caution with regard to developing critical literacies and authentic learning opportunities in online spaces.

Some of these alternative education settings allowed significant opportunity for individual differentiation and pedagogical approaches. Most especially, the voluntary setting focused on small group teaching and sometimes individual teaching sessions. John stated that:

> *I find that whenever I meet a new student I take a while for us to get to know them. I ask them about their interests... I go through... I give them a kind of quiz of questions from the course to see where they are at and what they have learnt before. I look at how they work, I look at how they remember things and I kind of come up with an*

> *idea of how they learn and what I could do that would best suit them. So like I have had some students who learn best verbally and I knew that talking about topics in class would be better for them than going through worksheets (Highgrove Learning Centre, John)*

John's description of his interaction with students emphasised a learner-centred pedagogical approach where the student's practices and preferences lead the teacher rather than the other way around.

Another pedagogical approach that featured in these interviews was efforts at cross-curricular co-operation and integration. This approach featured in all settings but was most evident in the special school setting. The teachers co-operated on thematic learning units and often created opportunities for experiential learning to develop learning:

> *So for example I would plan with the other third year teachers so we would be on the same page in relation to history or geography so that everything is being compounded. I suppose a lot of our work is integrated so if I was doing castles in history, medieval castles, we would go on a trip to a castle and we would use that as our geography trip and SPHE. (Claire, Greenfields Special School)*

The special school, because it operates a primary school system of one classroom teacher co-ordinating learning, allowed for this integrated approach to flourish.

Some students attending alternative settings may have had some difficulty with literacy on their educational trajectories, this was evidenced in all three settings. Therefore, teachers described at length how they scaffolded accessible learning opportunities through visual cues and through creating spaces for oral engagement in their classrooms:

> *Claire (SS): If I think of the school setting, I suppose, it just would sometimes be able to read information that you have given them. So for example I would never take out a book and just put that down there... You know I'd have to be very mindful of trying to keep it as... What's the word I'm looking for now... I suppose accessible for all, I suppose using a lot of pictures. Here in the school maybe for some of them even though they might be very orally very competent and could sit down and tell you all about ancient Egypt and how to make a mummy, sitting the ESS exam paper and actually physically reading the words would be a challenge for them.*

Clare's description of her pedagogical design represents the approach taken by many of the teachers in these settings. Teachers tended to support textual engagement orally and visually in order to prioritise learning without the printed word presenting too much of a barrier for the learners.

Jason described the centrality of student creativity in Highgrove Learning Centre. Students were encouraged to pursue their own artistic and reflective talents through art, music and writing:

> *Our students are very creative with their writing. They write poetry, they write essays even outside of class in their own time. One student has written a lot of poems over the last few months and she's turned them into a book which we are launching next week.*

Teachers gave many examples of how student agency was encouraged and supported in the voluntary setting. In this instance, writing was not just for assessment and examination; it was for reflection and in some instances publication. Such pedagogies emerged as far more authentic and organic to the student experience, therefore drawing on particular FoP available and appropriate for the student.

Tensions in assessment

The sections above detail many curricular and pedagogical innovations on the part of teachers where they prioritised learner-centredeness in the design and practice of their work. This section, focusing on assessment, illuminated less definition around this learner-centred approach and raised some interesting tensions around what counts as valid and fair assessment for students in alternative settings.

Some teachers viewed it as their function to develop the student as a competitor within the existing assessment system of external state examinations whilst others preferred to disrupt this view of assessment and forwarded a student-centred, process-based view of

education. This tension existed for many of the teachers, as is exemplified in the following extract from an interview with Claire, a teacher in Greenfields Special School, discussing how her students engage with external summative state assessment:

> *Claire: I suppose the good side is... I suppose a positive for them is that they get certification at the end of the third year and they have proof that they have a benchmark and for some of our students, that's all they will ever have.*
>
> *Interviewer: And the negative side of it?*
>
> *Claire: The negative side then, as we said earlier, sometimes you might feel that you are teaching towards the end product which is to either do a project or to sit an exam itself and that can be a bit of a challenge.*

Claire emphasised the value in achieving a benchmark equivalent to that of peers in mainstream settings as well as the dissatisfaction of being funnelled towards a terminal examination in her approach to teaching. This is the great dilemma for many teachers, mainstream and alternative, in systems where terminal examinations dominate the measurement of achievement. Alternatively, Thomas (Highgrove Learning Centre) described how "we try to release the competition away from there so you are not being judged by your peers…..we celebrate what you are capable of doing". Thomas described how his voluntary setting worked hard to dissipate the competitive comparative culture pervading education in favour of an ipsative model where the student was more reflective and concentrated on their own learning trajectory rather than on the comparison with those around them. This was particularly important in this setting as teachers reported that many of their students experienced significant performance anxiety during their experiences in mainstream post-primary settings.

However, there is evidence throughout these interviews that the cultural dominance of the state examinations (Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate) continued to preoccupy the teacher:

> *Claire: Because I do know myself when I have been teaching for the English exam here, you do get into a... I suppose a rut towards the end of teaching towards the exam paper.*

Similarly, Tara in Bloomsbury Youthreach centre, related how they engaged students through exam-focused pedagogies:

> *So like if I was teaching a subject then I would kind of nearly go to exam questions and [say] if you put this down you'd get three marks because our [students] If they can't do the rest of it they will stop and you can't think, well these are your marks so you need to get them.* (Tara, Bloomsbury YR)

In this instance exam preparation and rehearsal was a central strand of pedagogy. Learning was related to the marks one would receive in the exam as a clear extrinsic motivator to engage the students in their learning. Many of the teachers discussed the idea of the importance of achievement in the alternative settings being benchmarked with peers in mainstream settings. Kathy in the special school commented that "a positive for them is that they get a certification at the end of the third year and they have proof that they have a benchmark and for some of our students, that's all they will ever have". Kathy's emphasis is on benchmarking student achievement against other students in other schools, most particularly mainstream equivalents. This was the great dilemma for many of the teachers in these settings, balancing authentic and important learning for life with the demands of the external world as represented by the state examination system. Many interviewees were conflicted in terms of wanting to remain authentic to a learner-centred pedagogy and yet being driven towards the external examination.

Two of the three settings in this research took a very flexible approach to external state examinations and did not restrict their students to the time limits of mainstream settings. Instead, they took a more student-centred approach:

> *I genuinely wouldn't have any problem with the assessment system here because we work with it and we have used it in the sense that if a guy needs a three and a half*

> *year leaving cert here we will give him a three and a half year leaving cert. If a guy needs a four-year junior cert we will work with that. (Frank, Bloomsbury YR)*

Such flexibility appears to be the hallmark of the alternative settings in that they are prepared to place the students' needs ahead of the requirements of the external assessment system, and yet maintaining the value of such assessment for their students.

Junior cycle assessment is currently being reformed in order to shift the emphasis away from an entirely summative examination at the end of three years of post-primary schooling (DES 2015). The emergent system places more emphasis on assessment as process where students undertake school-administered assessment tasks at various points in their junior cycle education. For example, the subject English, the first to be reformed, now has an oral communication task in the second year of the junior cycle and a portfolio of writing submitted in December of the third academic year. Many of the teachers expressed positivity around such changes for students in mainstream and alternative settings:

> *Claire: Not every student is able to sit down for two and a half hours, two hours even in a mainstream setting and do well and actually show off what they are able to do so I would think continuous assessment would work very well. The emphasis on oral language I think is a fantastic feature and I think going forward that will... I suppose in our school as well will greatly benefit our students because for them when they do go out into the world it's being able to cope and being to interact with people is a huge challenge for them.*

Teachers in these alternative settings welcomed the movement towards less formal assessment processes where students would get opportunities to engage in more skills-based assessment activities rather than being dependent upon summative terminal examinations that were both stress-inducing and less likely to allow them to demonstrate their full range of learning. It must also be noted here that teachers in these settings were also in favour of external marking and/ or moderation rather than relying on teachers marking their own students, as was initially proposed. Teacher assessment was removed from the junior cycle

following an extended period of unrest and action from the teacher unions in Ireland. Jason, in Highgrove Learning Centre, commented:

> *I think assessment should be far more project-based and I think things need to be a bit less prescribed…..It's very dry and dull and they have asked me, 'Can I not put pictures in?' and 'Can I make a presentation?' I love that but no you can't. So I think if assessment was more interactive, more flexible….I think that would benefit the students an awful lot.*

Frank commented that he could 'see the terror on their faces' when students were facing state examinations and that he felt the examination system was a function of the neoliberal state and an educative governmentality where "schools are doing what they are asked to do", in terms of sorting a population for selection purposes.

Discussion and Conclusion

Throughout this data, clear evidence of learner-centredness in terms of choices around curriculum, pedagogy and, to a lesser degree, assessment, align the work of these alternative settings with the *funds of knowledge* approaches outlined earlier. These teachers, like those described in other studies, evidence cultural production and agency in alternative settings through dynamic, organic curriculum, pedagogy and practice (Aron 2006; Bascia and Maton 2016; Mills et al. 2017). Many of the teacher-participants are keenly aware of the disrupted educational histories of their students and they are often committed to reversing some of the *damage* and *violence* that Francis and Mills (2012) see being visited upon students on the margins of mainstream education structures. These teachers are more aligned with te Riele et al. (2016) where they saw teachers motivated by social justice and creating different learning environments to those that would have been experienced in mainstream settings. The results of this study align with other findings internationally where learner-centred pedagogical approaches, (Bascia and Maton 2016; Hadar, Hotam and Kizel 2018); positive relationships

and flexible approaches to curriculum (McGregor and Mills 2012) are central to the work of the alternative education setting.

Each of these settings introduced various measures to make their curricular engagements culturally responsive through drawing on the extensive out-of-school knowledges and experiences of their students. They endeavoured to provide non-traditional subjects to engage their students, they took integrated thematic approaches and they designed their own curriculum to suit their own students. This aligns with the FoK approach as they foreground the cultural, historical and personal contexts of their students through drawing on diverse areas such as Japanese art and language, thematic youth interests (sport, music, fashion, gaming, etc) to engage their youth in learning. The teachers here started their curricular interventions with the world of the students as opposed to the formal curriculum (Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti 2006). They forged links and experiences through the backgrounds, experiences and contexts of their students as they were more than aware that many of these students needed something different to what the mainstream had to offer; and that they were far more engaged with the curriculum, student, teacher nexus as a "deeply human encounter" (Schoone 2017, 11).

In terms of pedagogical approaches, these alternative settings produced accounts that included but extended far beyond traditional didactic transmission of knowledge. Teacher-participants offered accounts of using digital pedagogies, experiential learning, individually differentiated learning encounters, oral and visual engagement as well as foregrounding student agency and creativity. Teachers drew readily on the lifeworlds of their students, not just in what they taught (curriculum), but also in how they taught and how they conceptualised their work with the students (pedagogy). By drawing on the FoP generated by the students' lifeworlds, there is evidence for more meaningful engagement than what would ensue from what Lingard (2007, 246) termed the neo-liberalised "pedagogies of indifference"

where they “failed to make a difference in their lack of both intellectual demand and connectedness to the world”. There is some evidence emergent from this data, most especially from the Highgrove learning centre, of a shift towards a ‘productive pedagogies’ stance where teaching and learning are intrinsically linked to ideas of social justice and societal change on individual and communal levels (Lingard and Keddie 2013). Developing appropriate pedagogical interventions is not just a matter of good teaching; it is a matter of developing opportunities for power and agency among a marginalised student population.

Ironically, the pedagogical interventions were often straitened by the over-arching narrowness of the state assessment structure that was shown to restrain many of the learner-centred interventions described here. Assessment is the area where the influence of neoliberal educational reforms based on measurement and comparison have been most damaging, not just at institutional and cultural levels, but at the level of the individual young person struggling to navigate the educational landscape (Torrance 2017). These settings, to some extent, find themselves bound by the human capital version of education implicit in summative, standardised, competitive assessment moments. Indeed, human capital models are most likely to further marginalise and exclude those on the edge of formal education structures (Vandekinderen, Roets, Van Keer and Roose 2018).

An overarching concern of alternative education is that its very existence allows for the perpetuation of exclusion from a mainstream system that sometimes works to marginalise those on the edges in order to meet the needs of a neoliberal system that judges and rewards success based on numbers related to attendance, completion and achievement (Pennachia, Thomson, Mills and McGregor 2016). It is also the case that an individual deficit view can persist in alternative education settings and that significant work is required in order to improve experiences and outcomes for students marginalised from the mainstream (Pennachia and Thomson 2016). The purpose of this article has been to unpack some of the

positive and necessary work being done in alternative settings in how they mediate curriculum, pedagogy and assessment for students who have been removed or departed the mainstream post-primary education system in Ireland. The article has reported on some of these approaches through the FoK concept in order to situate this work in the broader field of how out-of-school knowledges, experiences and contexts can be used to develop motivation and connections in the alternative settings educational context. The perspectives generated here with teacher-participants, would benefit from greater numbers of participants in a wider complement of settings, as well as through comparison with those of their students and thus further studies could develop the portrait of alternative education provision in Ireland in significant and necessary ways, including further research into the outcomes for students of attending alternative education settings.

Note on Contributors

The authors are faculty members in the School of Education, University College Cork. Their research interests intersect across adolescent literacies, inclusive education, teacher identity and sociocultural understandings of identity and learning.

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[i] DEIS is the system of designation for schools serving disadvantaged areas at primary and post-primary level. It provides targeted supports and funding to these schools in an effort to offset the detrimental impact of poverty on educational opportunity and experience.